



Indonesia's
Lembah Strait

— *Relax & Enjoy Muck Diving & More*

Text and photos by Claudia Weber-Gebert
Blackwater photos and captions by Yos Amerta



Lembeh Strait

For underwater photographers, when we talk about Lembeh Strait in Indonesia, lots of macro subjects and small critters come to mind. “Muck diving,” which involves diving in muddy areas where lots of small animals can be found, is actually the main business of the local resorts and dive centres. But as you will find out in this article, there are lots of other things to see here too.

Biodiverse reefs and drop-offs

The beautiful coral reefs in the northern end of Lembeh Strait are lesser known. They are composed of flat coral gardens with dense populations of all kinds of corals and sponges but also beautifully overgrown drop-offs with large coral fans. Shoals of fish pass between the coral gardens—a fantastically beautiful scene. Here, there is a guarantee of getting beautiful underwater landscape shots.

Since these places are not as well known and so are less visited, the corals are still completely intact and host a large biodiversity. Of course, macro subjects can also be found in this coral landscape, but it is



School of blacklip butterflyfish on reef (top left); Harlequin shrimp on sponge (top right); Feather star crinoid, soft coral and sponges on reef (above); *Janolus* sp. 2 nudibranch (left). PREVIOUS PAGE Bright pink *Rhinopias* scorpionfish



Blackwater dives take place at 5m to 30m in the middle of the bay, away from the reef, where depths reach about 100m deep. Bonfire dives take place at shallower depths, on the sandy sea bottom or on the reef. Very bright lights, suspended in the water column, are attached to a down line at various depths. The light attracts plankton and other critters rarely seen in their larval stages. Blackwater and bonfire dives can be done anytime, but the most abundant dives occur up to four days before or four days after a new moon.



more worthwhile putting a wide-angle lens on one's camera and capturing images of the beautiful coral scenery. During topside intervals between dives, one can observe black monkeys jumping back and forth in the trees and hear them calling. They feed on the fruits of the trees perched on the high cliffs, towering over the sea. Impressive.

Blackwater photography Particularly noteworthy are the popular "blackwater dives" for underwater photographers offered by the local

dive centres. I participated in the blackwater dive at YOS Dive Lembeh Eco Beach Resort, where I stayed during my trip to Lembeh. These dives take place in the evenings after sunset. First comes the briefing, then the boat leaves for the dive. A 30m-long rope is attached to the underside

of the boat, and there is a small lamp attached to the rope every five metres. One dive guide is responsible for a maximum of two underwater photographers. In the water, the cone-shaped light beams from each lamp reveal the biomass welling up from the depths at night. Presented here are blackwater photos by Yos Amerta, owner of the resort, who has been photographing these creatures for many years. They feature larvae of all kinds, juvenile fish, jellyfish, baby octopuses—everything

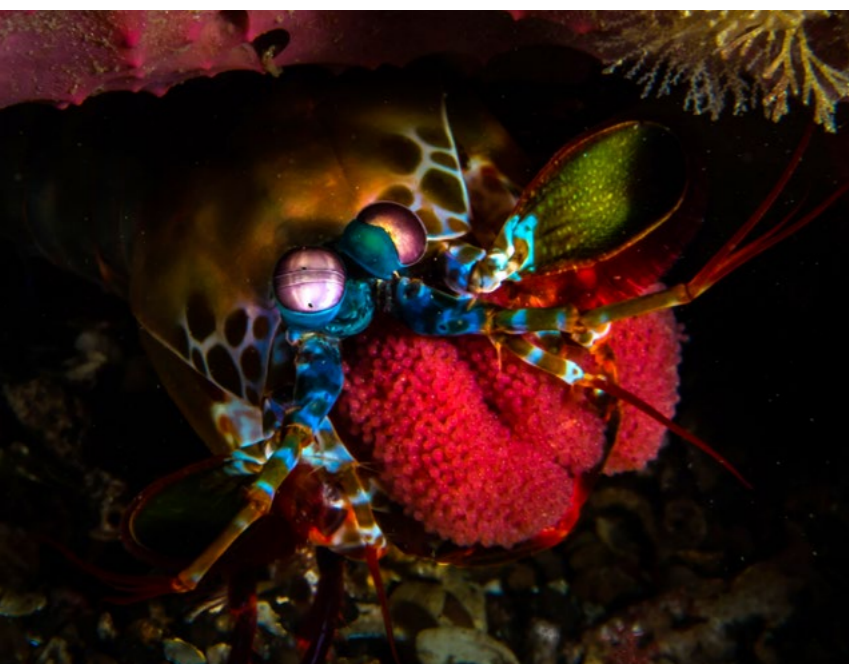
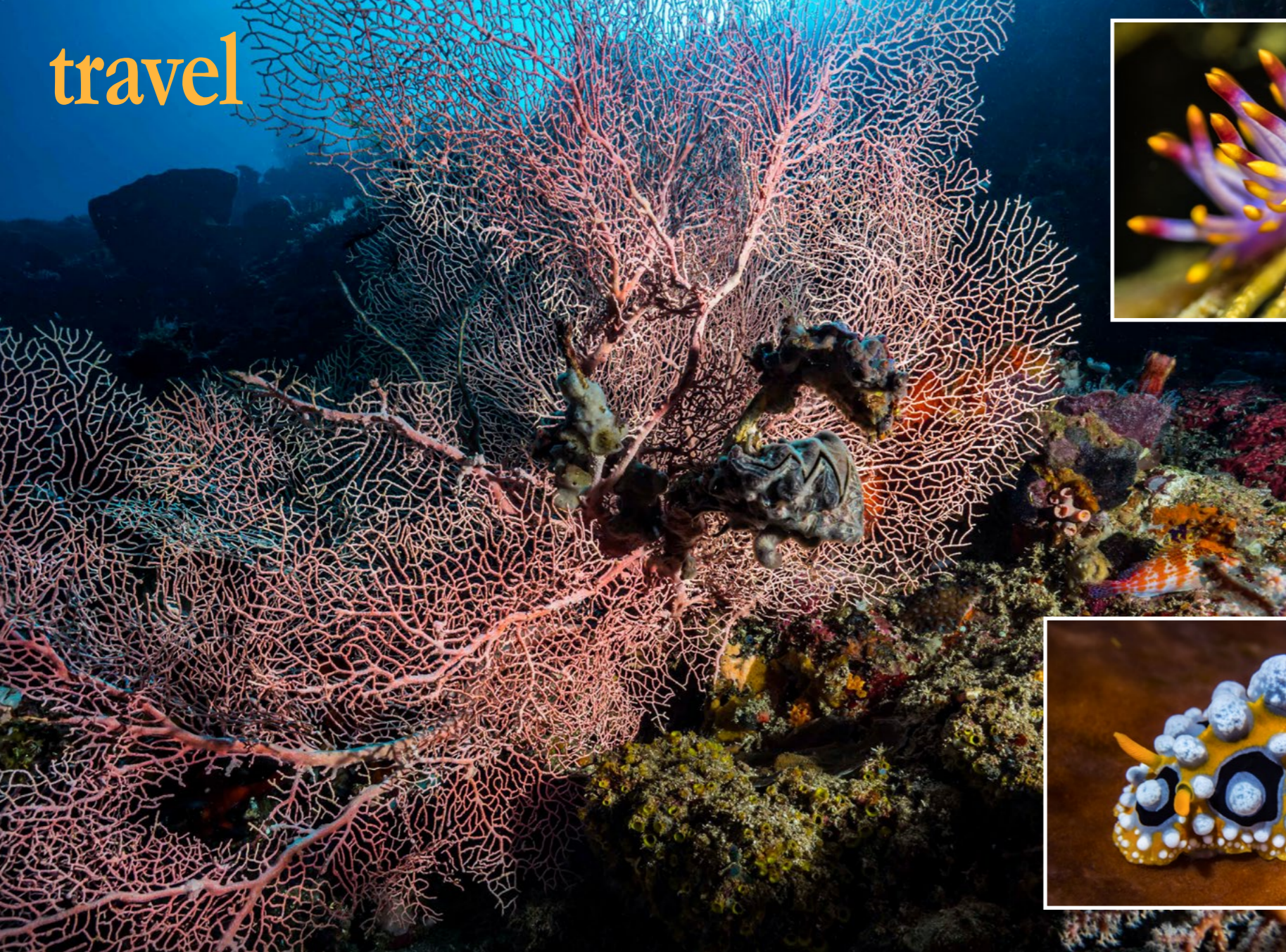
you cannot see during the day or in daylight. Yos and all the resort's dive guides are true professionals in this domain and are happy to pass on their knowledge of blackwater photography, so even an inexperienced underwater photographer will quickly get good results.

LOTUS BUNGALOWS
CANDIDASA - BALI
Blue Horizons Far From The Maddening Crowds

www.lotusbungalows.com

The largest migration on earth takes place every night in the oceans where the zooplankton migrates vertically up from the deep to feed. This creates a whole new world for underwater photographers looking for something new and unique.





Large sea fan on reef (above); *Flabellina nudibranch* (top center); *Phyllidia ocellata* nudibranch (center inset); Flamboyant cuttlefish (top right); Mimic octopus (lower right); Peacock shrimp with brood of eggs (left)

Diving

The resort has its own dive centre, which offers guests three to four dives per day. All the dive guides are certified dive instructors and underwater photographers, and are always available for advice and activities. Dive boats depart from the resort's own jetty directly on the beach.

One great thing about this resort is that guests had only to get themselves on board; everything else was transported onto the dive boat for them. Staff carried the guests' dive

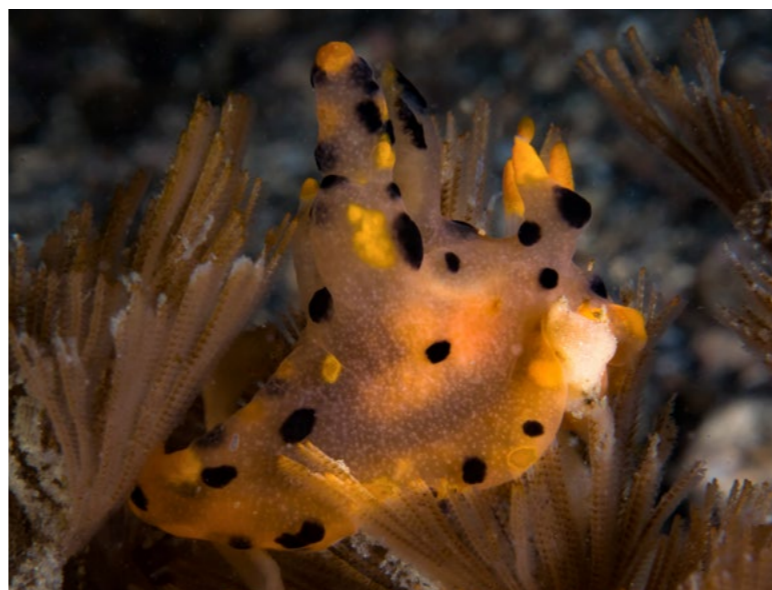
equipment and camera equipment onto the dive boat, as well as assembled BCDs with regulators and air tanks. It was easy diving at its best!

Here, only a thin wetsuit was required for diving, as the water temperature was around 27-30°C, and divers could dive until their tanks were empty. There were no time restrictions.

The dive guides were trained to find the tiniest creatures underwater

and to point them out to underwater photographers. So, good photos could be pre-programmed. They also knew which critters could be found

at which dive site. Most dives were "muck dives," so this involved diving down to the dark sand and sediment for which Lembeh is famous.



Ornate ghost pipefish (top left); Clown frogfish (top center); *Phyllodesmium longicirrum* nudibranch (top right); *Thecacera* sp nudibranch (above); Blue-ringed octopus (left)



Juvenile banggai cardinalfish (above); Allied cowrie (bottom left)

There was a multitude of different tiny underwater creatures to find on these dives. Critters were everywhere, if you could find them yourself. If not, the experienced eyes of the dive guides did not miss anything. In algae, on sponges, in soft corals and on anemones—there was something to be

found everywhere. Even if you were diving with a small group of divers, there was so much to see that there was enough for everyone to discover. So, as a photographer, it did not get annoying to be with a group, while taking photos.

After every dive, each diver was first given a small hot towel

to wash the saltwater off one's face, and then a hot drink—either tea or ginger water—was offered to warm oneself from within. Although the water temperature in the strait was around 30°C, it would often feel a bit colder than that after diving for more than an hour.

Once back at the resort's





Blueforce
MALDIVES & RED SEA

Are you looking for the best liveaboard cruise
in Maldives and Red Sea?

You just found it!



Maldives



Sudan & Egypt



Egypt

WWW.BLUEFORCEFLEET.COM

FOLLOW US ON



Through the resort's "trash hero" initiative, local kids help with beach clean-ups, learn how garbage is not only ugly but unhealthy, and are rewarded with cookies and juice.

jetty, everything was again easy for guests. The boat crew and dive guides took care of all that was necessary following the dive trip.

At the dive centre, suits were rinsed out and hung up. And since the dive guides had everything else under control, guests could simply relax and enjoy themselves.

At the resort, underwater camera housings were rinsed off and placed on a spacious shelf. There was also compressed air ready for drying cameras. Everything needed to prepare one's camera gear for the next dive was available, and there were enough power outlets to charge all our batteries.

Garbage, plastic and microplastic pollution

In addition to great biodiversity, Lembeh Strait is also well known for the presence of garbage, both above and below the water's surface—a problem of which many locals are now aware. However, a lot of trash is also being washed into the strait from the open sea, blown in by winds from the north and south. No matter how the wind blows, floating garbage patches always end up in the narrow channel between North Sulawesi and Lembeh Island.

As often as possible, a lot of garbage is fished out and disposed of. With the help of local village children and neighbouring residents, a daily

beach clean-up takes place at the resort. After the activity, the children are rewarded with cookies and juice. Thus, in this fun and friendly way, they learn that the garbage in the water is not only ugly, it is also unhealthy. So, the "trash hero" initiative becomes a motivation for these children.

Divers can, of course, also help to remove the garbage found underwater, which is not visible to the majority of the population. But be mindful. Always look carefully first before removing an object, because a lot of these items, which have been lying on the sea floor for a long time, have become homes to sea dwellers. Plastic bottles, cups and plastic lids may have become both protec-





Check first, before removing trash, as it may be home to a small fish or blenny!

like this. On the contrary, one can see that people live off fishing here, and one can count on one hand how many plastic items (and perhaps microplastics) end up

tion and homes for many small fish, octopuses and other small animals.

Despite the garbage one may come across in the area, diving in Lembah Strait still has its charm. Nature shows us that it does not give up; it tries to cope with the man-made problem. But that does not mean that we should go on

in the food chain, and in the fish that people eat. But the long-term effects of this garbage cannot be estimated in this way.

One also has to admit that a large amount of garbage in Indonesia is transported from Europe and is not properly processed and disposed of, and so

it finally ends up in the sea. So, please do not scold the people of Indonesia; rather, strive first to produce less plastic waste in Europe and other regions!

Lodgings

There are wonderful, beautiful resorts in the area to enjoy, such as the small yet friendly and cosy YOS Dive Lembah Eco Beach Resort where I stayed. The owner and manager Yos had studied architecture in Germany and designed the resort himself, as well as another resort in Bali. The architectural style of the resort combines modern, clean shapes with a touch of Balinese flair. Made from only natural materials, it was bright and beautiful, without a lot of frills. A real wellness oasis, it was easy to feel good here.

Nestled in a small community



ENJOY TRAINING IN A WHOLE NEW WAY!

CREATING LEADERS

LEARN MORE ABOUT
NAUI LEADERSHIP AND
DEVELOP THE TECHNIQUES
AND CONFIDENCE TO
BECOME A NAUI DIVE
PROFESSIONAL.



NAUIHQ@NAUI.ORG

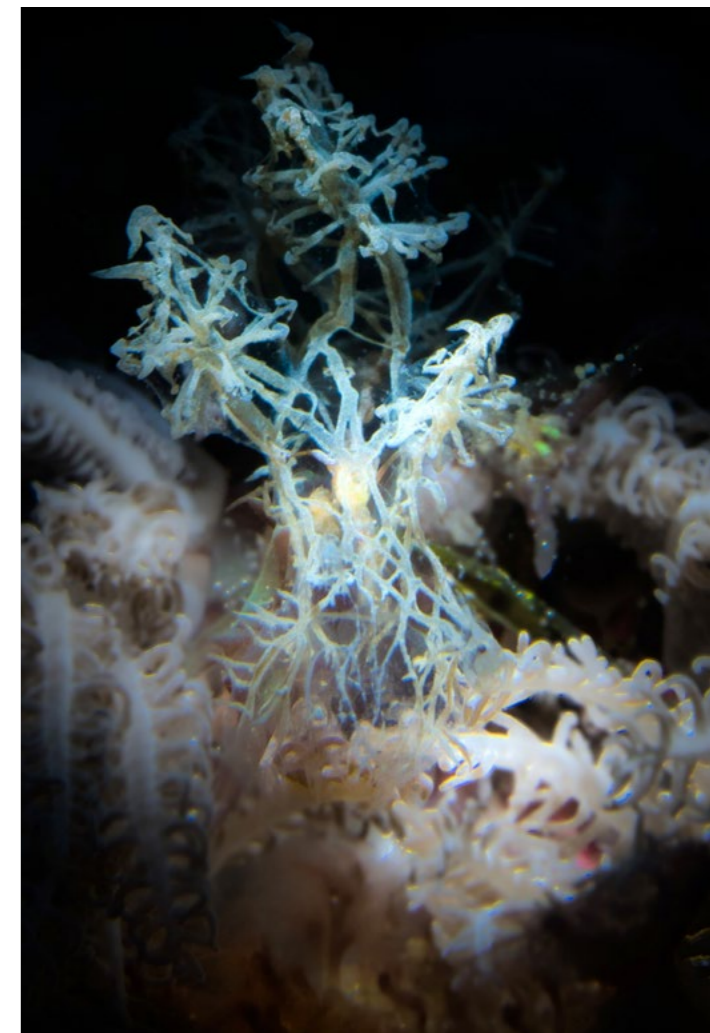
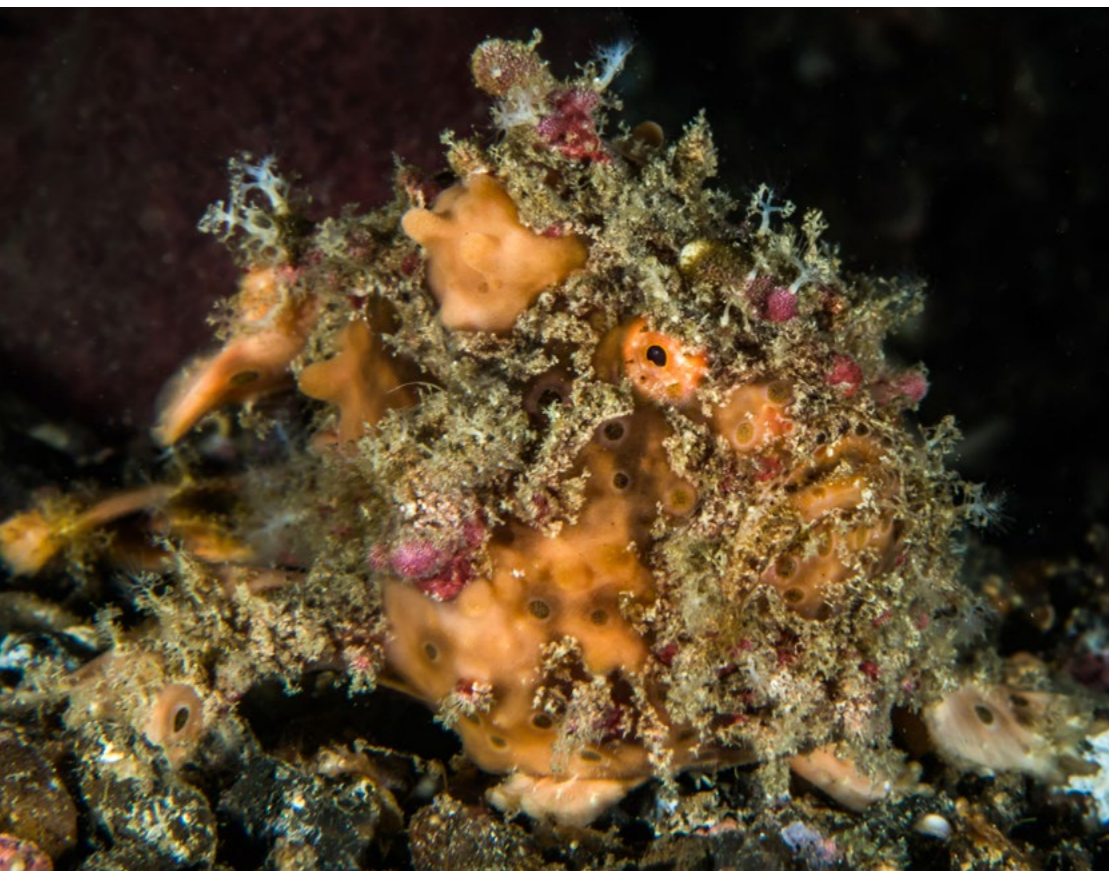
+1 813.628.6284



@NAUIWorldwide

COURSE DIRECTOR | CROSSOVER | DIVEMASTER | FIT | FREEDIVER | INSTRUCTOR





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Black hairy frogfish; Emperor shrimp on *Chromodoris splendida* nudibranch; Whip coral shrimp on whip coral (center); *Janolus* sp. 2 nudibranch (top right); *Glossodoris cincta* nudibranch; Candy crab (right); Warty frogfish (above)

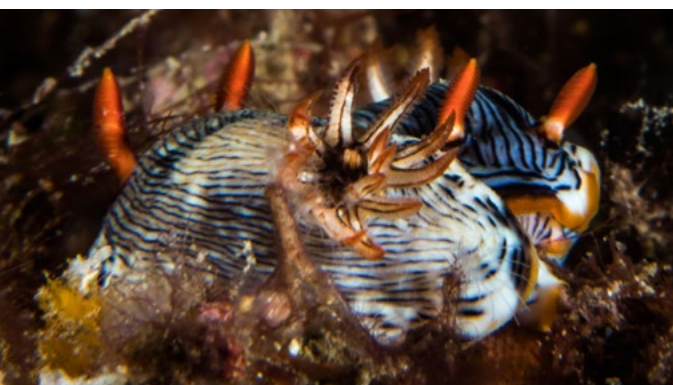
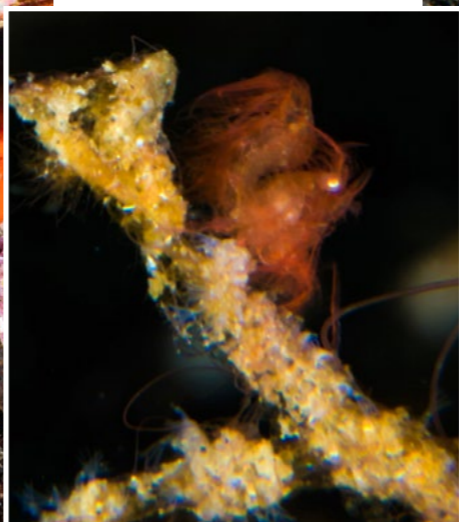
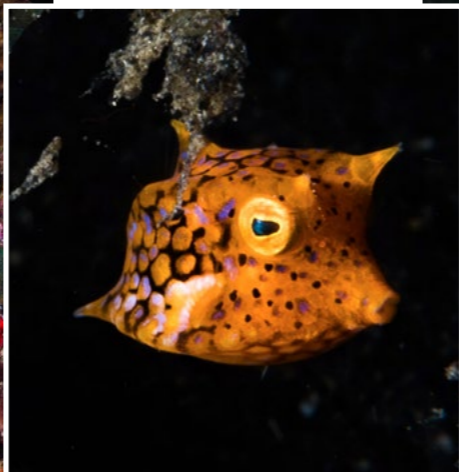
near Bitung, the resort was located right on the beach, next to the houses of local fishermen. It could host up to 22 guests. Although it did not cover a large area, its guest rooms, with their high ceilings, were really spacious. Bright colours

and natural surfaces provided a unique character that was reflected throughout the resort.

Some rooms had a balcony directly facing the beach, so the rising sun awoke guests when its first rays crested over the offshore island of Lembeh. The remaining guest rooms were situated adjacent to a garden area and were just as bright and welcoming. In every guest room, there was plenty of storage space and many sockets available for recharging camera equipment and batteries—simply a dream for underwater photographers. Indeed, my comfortable, large four-poster bed also invited dreams and restful sleep.

Rare ghost phantom nudibranch, *Melibe colemani*





Tambja morosa nudibranch (above); Pair of *Nembrotha lineolata* nudibranchs (left)

TOP LEFT TO RIGHT: Branching coral; Juvenile cowfish; Hairy shrimp; Veined octopus
CENTER LEFT TO RIGHT: Cuttlefish; *Chromodoris annae* nudibranch; *Flabellina exoptata* nudibranch; *Ceratosoma tenue* nudibranch; Robust ghost pipefish

All-inclusive meals could be enjoyed in the open-air restaurant terrace, which had a sea view and was shaded by a palm-thatched bamboo roof. The cuisine was Indonesian—but less spicy than usual—and really very, very tasty! Everything was freshly prepared by local cooks within the resort's small kitchen. They happily catered to individual requests, including those from guests

with food intolerances or allergies. Vegetarian cuisine was also available upon request.

Breakfast, lunch and dinner were served daily, but one could also order a snack between meals, which was then freshly prepared and served. Drinks were also available at any time. Fruit juices, which were served freshly squeezed, were particularly recommended, and

water and tea were always available with self-service.

What's more, anyone celebrating a birthday would be surprised with a cake in the evening. But these celebrations normally did not last too long, because the next morning, there would be diving again, and everyone wanted to be fit for it. The resort staff, who were nice



Lembeh Strait



Flagtail shrimp goby (above); Juvenile harlequin sweetlips (right)



people from the village, seemed to meet almost every wish just by reading our eyes. Warm Indonesian hospitality was reflected throughout the entire resort.

Afterthoughts

It's definitely worth the trip! Here, one

Blacklip butterflyfish, crinoids, sponges, sea squirts and squirrelfish on reef (above)

can hardly expect to feel better or more at ease. Single divers can quickly make friends here, as in the evenings, one can enjoy pleasant chats with other international guests. For this, speaking English is an advantage.

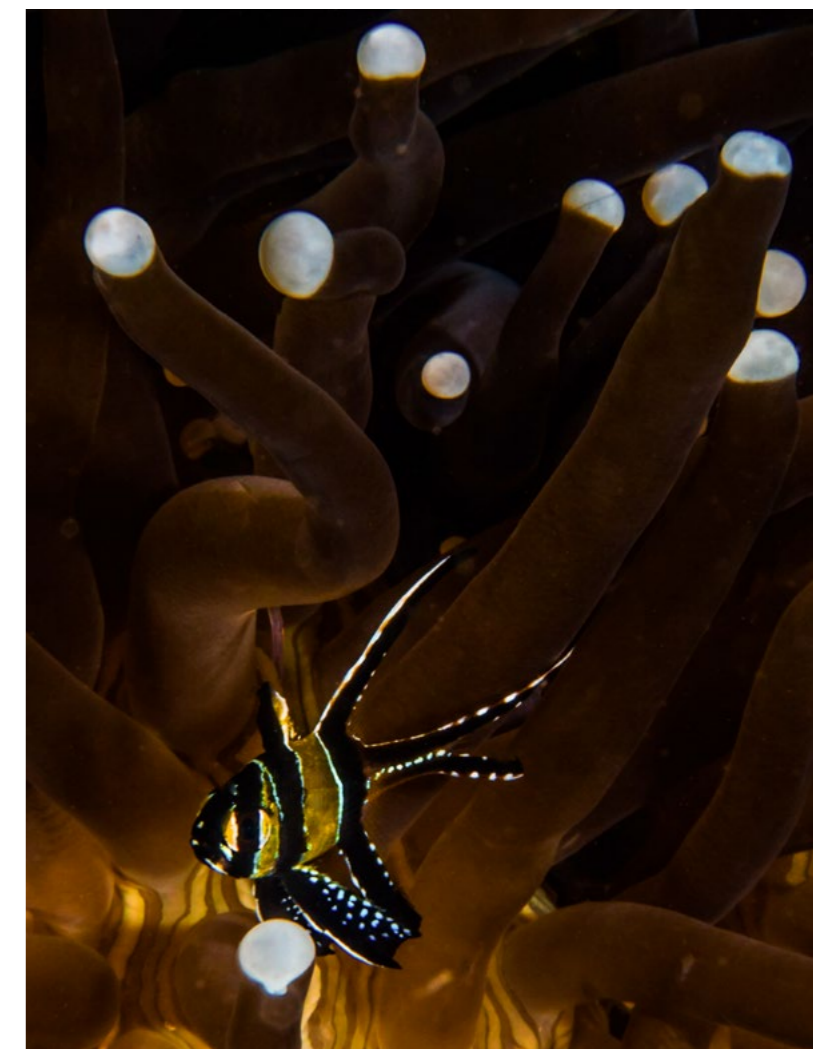
As for getting to Lembeh, flight connections can be made via Singapore or Jakarta. From either of these hubs, one can fly with Garuda Air or Batik Air to Manado in North Sulawesi. Individual pick-up and transfer service from and to Manado Airport is provided by the resort. ■

For more impressions, have a look at this [video >>>](#)

Claudia Weber-Gebert is an advanced diver, underwater photographer and dive writer based in Germany.



Tiny juvenile painted frogfish (above); Halgerda batangas nudibranch (center inset)



Juvenile banggai cardinalfish in anemone (above); Common octopus (top right)

